Shakespeare, William

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Title

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Dates and places of birth and death

Born: 1564, Stratford-upon-Avon, England / Died: 1616, Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Abstract

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) is the world's most highly-acclaimed literary figure, known for his plays and poems. Shakespeare is celebrated for his comic touch, kaleidoscopic, tightly-structured verse, and genial sense of human nature, manifest in finely-detailed individual characterization. Less widely-recognized, however, is the depth of his engagement with classical and contemporary philosophy, which bears comparison to more obviously learned contemporaries such as Michel de Montaigne (1533 – 1592), John Case (c. 1540 – 1600), and Justus Lipsius (1547 – 1606).

Biography

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the son of John Shakespeare, a glove-maker, municipal magistrate, and secret Catholic, and Mary Arden, a member of the local gentry. He was educated in Latin literature at the local grammar school. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582 and fathered three children by the age of 21. The seven years that follow the birth of his children, known as Shakespeare's "lost years," remain mysterious, due to lack of historical evidence. Having relocated to London, it seems that Shakespeare began his theatrical career as an actor, then turned to playwriting in the early 1590s. He also became known for his narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, written in 1593-4 while the theatres in London were closed due to outbreaks of the plague, and dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

Shakespeare's plays were performed in London by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which with the ascension of James I in 1603 became the King's Men. Shakespeare himself was a shareholder in the company, as well as the venue they constructed for themselves, the Globe Theatre. While in London, Shakespeare rented a room from the Mountjoys, a family of French Huguenot refugees. In 1596, he secured a coat of arms for his father, proclaiming his status as a gentleman, and in 1597, he bought New Place, at the time the second-largest house in Stratford, demonstrating the scale of the fortune he had acquired from his theatrical ventures in London. Shakespeare seems to have retired to Stratford at some point on or around 1610, perhaps prompted by repeated further outbreaks of plague in London 1603-9, and died in Stratford in 1616 at the age of 52. Notable contemporaries include Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and George Chapman, as well as the English commentator on

Aristotle, John Case, and the Italian expatriate who translated Montaigne's *Essays* into English, John Florio.

Thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays survive, as well as 154 sonnets, two epyllia, and a few other short poems. Prominent literary influences on Shakespeare's work include Roman comedy, Senecan tragedy, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as Gower, Chaucer, and traditional English mystery and morality plays. His plays about the English Wars of the Roses draw on Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and his plays about Roman history on Plutarch's *Parallel Lives.* Shakespeare cites a passage from Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" in *The Tempest*, and debate continues to this day as to the exact nature, timing, and extent of his exposure to Montaigne's thought. Florio's translation did not appear in print until 1603; some scholars, however, see signs that Shakespeare may have read Montaigne's *Essays* earlier, either in English in manuscript, or in another translation, now lost, or in print in their original French (Hamlin 2013; Hamlin 2016).

Heritage and rupture with the tradition

Shakespeare is not typically associated with philosophy in the popular imagination. The depth of his engagement with contemporary as well as classical thought tends to be underestimated, due to two pernicious but abiding myths. The first such myth about Shakespeare is that he was relatively uneducated. Ben Jonson notoriously claimed that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek." John Milton describes him in *L'Allegro* in contrast to "learned Jonson" as "Fancy's child," warbling "native woodnotes wild." Nineteenth-century German Romantics seized upon Shakespeare as a representative outsider or folk artist, whom they saw as happily ignorant of classical norms (Paulin 2012). Shakespeare's disregard for classical rules of decorum,

however, as well as neoclassical "unities" derived from Aristotle's *Poetics,* was not in fact naïve, but instead can be better understood as a deliberate rejection of the conventions of Senecan tragedy and Plautine comedy in favor of the more expansive, egalitarian aesthetics of medieval Christian drama (Auerbach 1946; Cooper 2006).

By the standards of our own historical moment, Shakespeare was remarkably well-educated in classical philosophy and history, as well as literature (Burrow 2013). He was able to read Latin easily, and he shows some facility with French, as well, in *Henry V.* Over the course of his lifetime, synthetic works such as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and Plutarch's *Moralia,* as well as Montaigne's *Essays,* were translated into English. Shakespeare cites Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* for example, in *Troilus and Cressida*: Hector criticizes Paris and Troilus as "young men, whom Aristotle thought / Unfit to hear moral philosophy" (2.2.166-7; cp. 1095a2; Elton 1997). Brutus's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar* adopts the style of Stoic logic, as recounted by Cicero, as well as Seneca (Gray 2016a). Recurrent descriptions of friends and rivals as mirrors in his Roman plays recall Aristotle's *Magna Moralia,* as mediated through John Case's commentary on this treatise, *Reflexus speculi moralis* (1596) (Gray 2017).

The second such misleading but pervasive myth arises from Keats's claim that Shakespeare was a paragon of what he calls "negative capability." In brief, Keats maintains that Shakespeare, unlike Coleridge, does not seek to connect particular instances to the demonstration of more universal principles. This sense of Shakespeare as uniquely comfortable with "ambiguity" proved attractive to mid-twentieth-century critics such as A. P. Rossiter and Norman Rabkin, who present Shakespeare's plays as "undecideable." Their distinctive "ambivalence" is presented as in keeping with the aesthetic ideal Kant describes in his *Critique of Judgment* as "purposiveness without purpose" (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) (Rossiter 1961; Rabkin 1981).

Nevertheless, Shakespeare does take definite philosophical positions, which can be discerned in repeated instances across multiple plays. Shakespeare lived at a point of transition in which early medieval optimism about the possibility of a partial synthesis of classical philosophy and Christian theology through assimilation of Aristotelian concepts, methods, and terminology was breaking down in light of the resurgence of other forms of classical philosophy such as Stoicism and Epicureanism which were more obviously incompatible with Christian dogma. Within the context of this tension, Shakespeare is interested in ethics above all, and he tends to side with those classical schools of thought about ethics which are more compatible with Christianity against those which are less so. In other words, by the standards of his day, Shakespeare is relatively conservative. As was the case for most of his contemporaries, his touchstones in terms of philosophy are Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero's *De Officiis,* rather than, e.g., Seneca's *De Constantia* or, still less, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (Headlam Wells 2005; Bevington 2008; Gray and Cox 2014; Raspa 2016).

A third obstacle to recognizing Shakespeare's interest in philosophy arises from longstanding disagreement about what kinds of thinking can be considered properly philosophical. When Shakespeare uses the word itself, "philosophy," for example, it almost always means more specifically "moral philosophy." Like the ancient Romans, as well as many of his fellow Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare sees ethics as the central focus of philosophical inquiry, and success in attaining and preserving human "happiness" as its most reliable criterion. In *The Taming of the Shew,* for instance, Lucentio tells his servant Tranio that he plans to "study / virtue" and "apply" that "part of philosophy" which "treats of happiness / By virtue specially to be achiev'd" (1.1.17-20). Tranio professes to admire such "moral discipline," but does not altogether share his master's "resolve / To suck the sweets of sweet philosophy" (1.1.27-30). "Let's be no Stoics nor no stocks," he begs, "Or so devote to Aristotle's checks / As

Ovid be an outcast quite abjur'd" (1.1.31-33). To be a Stoic, as Tranio sees it, is akin to being a "stock": a deaf, dumb, insensate piece of wood. The pun, which goes back to Calvin, implies that being a Stoic, like being put in the stocks, means being forced into unnatural, uncomfortable immobility.

Shakespeare tends to distrust logical deduction. Syllogisms in his plays tend to be instruments of deception, rather than clarification; logic in general tends to be specious. Some of his most celebrated soliloquies are in effect case studies in self-serving, self-deceptive sophistry: Macbeth in *Macbeth*, "If it were done" (1.7.1); Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, "It must be by his death" (2.1.10); Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, "May't be / Affection?" (1.2.137-8); and so on (Gray 2018a). This wariness towards the traditional tool of the trade, argumentation, puts Shakespeare at odds with Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic Greek philosophy, and medieval Scholasticism, all of which, like present-day analytic philosophy, tend to rely on the internal logical coherence of verbal propositions as their litmus test of truth. Instead, like Roman philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca, as well as Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus and Montaigne, Shakespeare tends to evaluate theoretical claims in light of their effects in practice. And by this criterion, he finds, like Montaigne, that Stoicism, in particular, fails to measure up (Miles 1996; Gray 2018b). Recalling the *domina-nutrix* trope of Senecan tragedy, Shakespeare repeatedly depicts characters denouncing attempts to appease their anguish with a conventional Stoic *consolatio* (Gray 2016b). "I pray thee, peace," Leonato says, replying to such blandishment in *Much Ado about Nothing.* "I will be flesh and blood; / For there was never yet philosopher / That could endure the toothache patiently, / However they have writ the style of gods / And made a push at chance and sufferance" (5.1.33-8). When Romeo learns he is banished, Friar Laurence tries to console him with "adversity's sweet milk, philosophy," but Romeo will have none of it. "Hang up

philosophy," he cries. "Unless philosophy can make a Juliet, / Displant a town, reverse a prince's doom, / It helps not, it prevails not: talk no more" (3.3.57-60).

In terms of epistemology, critics tend to align Shakespeare, like Montaigne, with Skepticism, building on Keats's sense of his "negative capability," as well as the earlier, more formalist critical tradition represented by Rossiter and Rabkin (Bradshaw 1987; Bell 2002; Hamlin 2005a; Hamlin 2005b; Cox 2007; Nuttall 2007; Sherman 2007). Shakespeare's skepticism can be easily overstated, however, unless it is balanced by a sense of his more fundamental sympathies. Evaluating abstract conclusions about morality in light of hypothetical concrete case studies is not the same as remaining forever poised in exquisite, unresolved doubt. Shakespeare's emphasis on practical viability as opposed to theoretical consistency to some extent anticipates modern pragmatism (Engle 1993). Nevertheless, his truth-claims are not entirely provisional or unsystematic. Instead, Shakespeare can be better understood as sharing Aristotle's sense of ethics as inherently somewhat imprecise; a messy business which is to some degree contingent upon circumstance, albeit not absolutely so (*Nicomachean Ethics,* 1098a).

Like Aristotle, as well as Montaigne, Shakespeare is interested in "equity"; that is, in the process of accommodating and adjusting general principles to particular situations (*Nicomachean Ethics,* 1137b; Decoursey 2011). Put in Christian terms, Shakespeare is interested in the tension between the "spirit" and the "letter" of the law. The "problem" in Shakespeare's "problem plays," for example, is precisely this question of accommodation. In *The Merchant of Venice, All's Well that Ends Well,* and *Measure for Measure,* known as "problem plays," Shakespeare evaluates the Christian ethical imperative to forgive others against what are in effect limit cases of its application. He acknowledges the attractions of revenge, as well as arguments for strict justice, but in the end, in keeping with Christian doctrine, upholds the superior use-value of what

Portia calls “the quality of mercy” (4.1.180). “It is twice blest,” she explains; “it blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (4.1.182-3).

In sum, Shakespeare does arrive at answers to questions that are recognizably philosophical. His “organon” is not logic, however, but experience. He is not interested in how philosophers arrive at their conclusions, but instead in whether or not those conclusions correspond to his own lived experience. Fiction for Shakespeare, like history for Montaigne, serves as a thought-experiment to test the validity of a school of thought, juxtaposing its claims against representative, hypothetical examples. Once this method is understood, it is possible to see Shakespeare, like Montaigne, as returning to certain familiar philosophical controversies repeatedly over the course of his career. He sides with Cicero on the importance of our obligations to others, for example, against Epicurean exhortations to withdraw from society and “live unknown” (Bate 2008; Greenblatt 2011; Gray 2014). He opts for Aristotelian moderation of the passions, as opposed to Stoic eradication, which he sees as impossible in practice. “‘Tis all men's office to speak patience / To those that wring under the load of sorrow,” Leonato observes, “But no man's virtue nor sufficiency / To be so moral when he shall endure / The like himself” (5.1.27-31). In keeping with a Christian sense of the limits of our unaided human capacities, Shakespeare does not believe it is possible for us to control our emotions reliably through the exercise of our own individual reason, much less eliminate such “affects” altogether. Berowne’s prescient warning in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* resembles the end of Montaigne’s *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, in its keen sense of man’s postlapsarian weakness: “every man with his affects is born, / Not by might mastered, but by special grace” (1.1.149-50).

Having said that Shakespeare’s focus is ethics, there is one notable exception. Turning to metaphysics, Shakespeare does occasionally show characters musing aloud about what seems to be Epicurean materialism, as well as its implications for the Christian doctrine of the afterlife. In

Measure for Measure, visiting Claudio in prison in the guise of a friar, Duke Vincentio paints a picture of death as no more than "sleep," which Claudio initially finds convincing and consoling (3.1.17). "Thou art not thyself," the Duke tells him, "For thou exist'st on many a thousand grains / That issue out of dust" (3.1.19-21). Hamlet, too, wonders if death might be no more than "sleep," and reflects on the permutations of the particles that compose the body. "To what base uses we may return," he observes, standing in a graveyard. "Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?" (5.1.190-92) Horatio balks, but Hamlet gleefully persists, launching into a rhyming jingle: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away," etc. (5.1.202-3). Some critics see signs of engagement here with Epicurean atomism, as well as its application in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* as a refuge from fears about the afterlife (Martin 1945). Shakespeare's use of the word "philosophy" in *Hamlet* lends support to claim that Shakespeare is responding here to Epicureanism: speaking to his friend, Horatio, about the apparition of his father's ghost, Hamlet renounces this school of thought's signature materialism. "There are more things in heaven and earth," he proclaims, "Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.165-6). It is perhaps significant, as well, that neither Hamlet nor Claudio proves entirely able, in the end, to shake off and dismiss his conviction that life continues after death. When Shakespeare invokes Epicurean metaphysics, if indeed he does, he frames it and contains it within Christian orthodoxy.

Innovative and original aspects

In his sonnets, as well as his epyllia, Shakespeare invokes and subverts the conventions of Petrarchan poetry such as that of his English contemporaries Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Like Montaigne, as well as Sidney, Shakespeare sees Neoplatonic idealization of

romantic love familiar from Italian models such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, and Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* as incompatible with human nature. His early comedy *Love's Labour's Lost,* above all, undermines Neoplatonic claims about the possibility of mystical transcendence through ascetic self-restraint. The premise of *Love's Labour's Lost* is that the King of Navarre and his companions, three young noblemen, vow to withdraw from the world, including especially the company of women, in order to devote themselves to "philosophy." "To love, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die," Dumaine proclaims, "With all these living in philosophy" (1.1.31-2). As one of them, Berowne, predicts, over the course of the play, each of the four men falls in love, breaks his vow, and returns to the world.

Shakespeare seems to have had some doubts, as well, about the possibility of Stoic "constancy" and "patience," in keeping with debates going back to antiquity regarding Stoic claims about the imperturbable tranquility of the quasi-legendary Stoic sage or *sapiens.* Could such a man really exist? Hamlet praises his friend, Horatio, as a man who is not "passion's slave" (3.2.73), and Horatio himself describes himself as "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.348). Yet even he has his moment of suicidal despair, once he discovers that Hamlet has been poisoned. Shakespeare's most complete picture of a would-be Stoic is Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, whom he presents as an amiable, misguided, self-deceived hypocrite. Despite strenuous effort, Brutus proves unable to entirely suppress strong emotions such as anger and grief (Nuttall 2007; Gray 2016a).

Shakespeare also seems aware of classical Cynicism. Apemantus in *Timon of Athens,* listed in the dramatis personae as "a churlish philosopher," is a representative misanthropic Cynic; a model which Timon himself comes to imitate (Pierce 2005). When King Lear goes mad, he encounters a young nobleman, Edgar, in a rainstorm on a heath, disguised as a "poor Tom," a mostly-naked wandering madman. Lear refers to him repeatedly as a "philosopher," perhaps

thinking of Diogenes. “Thou art the thing itself,” Lear proclaims; “unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art” (3.4.104-6). Lear then tries to imitate “poor Tom” by stripping off his clothes. Through memorable “bitter fools” such as Feste in *Twelfth Night*, as well as Lear’s Fool in *King Lear,* Shakespeare combines Cynicism with Pauline and Erasmian notions of the secret wisdom hidden in ostensible folly (Hershinow 2014).

Turning to philosophy of mind, supernatural figures such as Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Ariel in *The Tempest,* and the witches in *Macbeth*, as well as Iago in *Othello,* can be understood in part as personifications of the imagination, as this faculty is described in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, as well as his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Protean mutability, unpredictability, unreliability, and amorality of these characters speak to pervasive concerns about the contribution of “fantasy” or “fancy” to weakness of will (*akrasia*). Anxiety about the susceptibility of the imagination to human “passions” was exacerbated by contemporary Protestant iconoclasm (Rossky 1958). Iago’s relationship with Othello, for example, resembles the relationship between Archimago and the Red Crosse Knight in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Archimago, an allegorical figure for the imagination, takes on the appearance of a Catholic holy man, but turns out to be a deceptive, malevolent magician, leading the hero astray (Gray 2007).

Impact and Legacy

Shakespeare’s plays are widely considered the best in any language and continue to be performed regularly world-wide. Philosophers have been especially fascinated by *Hamlet*: thinkers who have grappled with the play include Kant, Coleridge, Herder, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Benjamin, Arendt, Schmitt, Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Badiou, and Žižek (Kottman 2009; Cutrofello 2014).

Hegel, in particular, was exceptionally well-versed in Shakespeare's plays, even translating part of *Julius Caesar* into German as a teenager. Hegel's influential account of the master-slave dialectic in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for example, may in part be based on Shakespeare's depiction of male rivalry in his Roman plays.

Jacob Burckhardt celebrates the Renaissance as the birth of individualism, and many critics see Shakespeare as sympathetic to this development (Holbrook 2010; Strier 2011). Philosophically speaking, however, Shakespeare, like Hegel after him, was strongly opposed to neoclassical as well as classical admiration for what Lipsius, like Seneca, calls "constancy"; Kant, "autonomy"; and Quentin Skinner, "neo-Roman liberty" (Skinner 1998). Instead, Shakespeare sides with Aristotle, who sees human beings as by nature social and interdependent (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b; Selleck 2008; Kuzner 2011; Gray 2018b). In his *Politics*, as well as his discussion of friendship, Aristotle calls into question contemporary idealization of self-sufficiency. Aristotle's illustration of misguided self-isolation is Achilles' retirement to his ships in Homer's *Iliad* (*Politics*, 1253a; cp. *Iliad*, 9.63): an example which Shakespeare also takes up in his *Troilus and Cressida* (Tilmouth 2013; Gray 2017).

Shakespeare's critique of what he calls "sufficiency" can be seen most clearly, however, in his depiction of the Roman character Coriolanus, who tries and fails to disregard "instinct" and "stand, / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (5.3.35-7). Hegel draws upon such Aristotelian reflections on the inextricable connection between the self and the other, as mediated through Shakespeare's plays, in his much more abstract articulation of the role of intersubjective "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) in self-definition. More recently, Stanley Cavell has taken up an analogous line of thought, analyzing plays such as *King Lear* and *Othello* in terms of what he calls "acknowledgment" (Cavell 2003).

Cross-References

Action and Contemplation in Renaissance Philosophy

Aristotelianism

Aristotelians, British

Augustinianism

Burckhardt, Jacob

Case, John

Comedy in Renaissance Literature

Epicureanism

Erasmus, Desiderius

Ethics, Renaissance

Friendship

Human Dignity in Renaissance Philosophy

Humanism

Imagination in Renaissance Literature

Imagination in Renaissance Philosophy

Individual, Renaissance Concept of

Lipsius, Justus

Love in Renaissance Philosophy

Lyric / Poetry in the Renaissance

Montaigne, Michel de

Passions in Renaissance Psychology

Prudence in Renaissance Philosophy

Sidney, Sir Philip

Spenser, Edmund

Stoicism

Weakness of Will

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